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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the review and revision of the Overseas Refugee Training Program's curriculum in English as a second language. The discussion focuses on the rationale and guidelines for the revision, the resources used to guide the process, and the criteria used in the selection of competencies. Specific intentions in revising the list of competencies included retaining the competency-based framework, focusing on the most critical competencies, developing language skills at the expense of some of the less necessary competencies, using the results of formative testing, and developing a special A-level curriculum. Competencies that were felt to be redundant, not critical for survival, or better taught stateside were deleted, reducing the number by more than one-third. Participants felt that the curriculum revision reflected the concerns of the teachers and supervisors implementing it and that it addressed the changing language needs of refugee students in the United States. The original and revised competencies at each proficiency level are outlined for comparison. (MSE)

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Competencies Revisited: Revising the Overseas ESL Curriculum

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This article reports on the review and revision of the Overseas Refugee Training Program's ESL curriculum at the 1985 regional task force meeting in Montemar, Philippines. The article discusses the rationale and guidelines for the revision, the resources used to guide the process, and the criteria used in the selection of competencies.

In the early summer of 1985, ESL teachers and supervisors in the Overseas Refugee Training Program were asked to evaluate the ESL curriculum. For the most part, the response was enthusiastic. Program staff liked the curriculum because it focused on survival skills, taught "real-life" language, and lent itself to role plays and large-scale simulations.

At the same time, teachers had come to feel that the curriculum included more material than could be covered in a 20-week course. And while supervisors liked the curriculum's built-in review of vocabulary and structure, they felt that the number of competencies did not allow enough time to focus on pronunciation, grammar, and reading/writing skills development.

In June, 1985, a regional task force meeting was held in Montemar, Philippines, to review the regional ESL competency-based curriculum. Detailed level-by-level, competency-by-competency work was carried out over several days of the meeting by ESL training program staff. A consultant from the U.S. provided stateside perspective.

Prior to the meeting, implementing agencies at the sites in Southeast Asia analyzed and reviewed the list of competencies. This preparation helped participants make efficient use of meeting time, and it ensured that informed decisions would be made during the review process.

Revision Rationale and Guidelines

Although the revised competency list contains a significant number of changes, the overall goal of the ESL component of the curriculum has remained the same. ESL instruction still aims to provide refugees with the English language skills they need in order to meet their basic survival needs during the first three months of resettlement.

The list of ESL competencies was examined in order to address the following concerns. These concerns became the guidelines for the Montemar review process.

1. Retain Competency-Based Framework

Participants at the meeting all agreed that a competency-based approach is the most appropriate for this student population.

2. Focus on the most Critical Competencies

Teachers had felt pressed to cover all the competencies required for a given level. As a result, adequate attention had not been paid to the most important competencies, such as dealing with emergencies.

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A related concern was that teachers had difficulty determining priorities for classes that needed more time to cover the required material. It was decided that only minimal competencies for each level would be included in the list. It was assumed that teachers could select from competencies at the next highest level if their classes could handle the material.

3. Develop Language Skills

Participants pointed out that the number of competencies did not allow enough time for grammar, pronunciation, and reading/writing activities. Since these basic language skills are necessary for language development, participants suggested that a reduction in the number of required competencies would give teachers time to address the special needs of individual classes in these areas. It was assumed that these skills could be taught within the competency-based framework of the curriculum.

The need to focus more attention on literacy skills was stressed. This recommendation applied not only to A-level students, but to students at other levels as well. Participants agreed that D- and E-level students, in particular, could benefit from additional focus on reading and writing. In contrast to past experience, site staff were finding that more and more of their D- and E-level students did not have strong reading and writing skills.

While it was decided that literacy skills would assume a more important role in the curriculum, listening and speaking skills would continue to receive primary attention.

4. Use the Results of Formative Testing

Another effect of the number of competencies in the 1983 list was that there was no time to use the results of formative testing (classroom testing that provides immediate feedback to teachers and students). Participants felt that to develop a formative testing program without making provisions for incorporating the information it contributes into the instructional program would be counter-productive.

5. Develop a Special A-Level Curriculum

Special concerns for A-level students were a focus of discussion throughout the meeting. Test data showed that although the majority of A-level students had made significant gains in English, their proficiency was still extremely limited.

Studies and surveys also showed that most resettled A-level students had either extended family or other support (sponsor, friends, MAAs) to help them. (See Center for Applied Linguistics 1985, RMC Research Corporation 1984.) Many tasks which the program previously had prepared students to accomplish independently were now being handled with assistance. Participants therefore recommended that A-level competencies include only what was actually required of most resettled A-level refugees. For example, very few A-level refugees are faced with finding their own housing in the initial phases of resettlement. For this reason, the topic of Housing was dropped from the A-level curriculum.

By reducing the number of A-level competencies to ensure review and mastery of only those competencies critical for survival, and by adding a developmental literacy component, participants felt that A-level students would be better prepared for entry into the U.S.

Resources

At the meeting, participants made use of the following resources to guide the competency review:

1. Competencies identified by the Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) Project.[1] Participants wanted to make informed decisions about revising, adding, and deleting competencies. Participants felt that the MELT results were an excellent source of information, since they reflect recent stateside input concerning the relative importance of ESL competencies for refugees. As a result, participants recommended that the MELT results be consulted as each competency was reviewed.
2. Composite data from 1983-84 regional proficiency testing. This information was useful in identifying areas of student weakness. For example, results showed that lower-level students had difficulty using American money. Hence, competencies on the use of money were retained.

1. The Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) Project was funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement to develop consistency among English language training programs for refugees across the U.S. and to establish linkages with the Overseas Refugee Training Program. A product of the 1983-84 MELT project was the MELT Resource Package, which contains a list of ESL competencies necessary for a refugee's survival in the U.S.

3. Results of studies on trends in resettlement.[2] For example, studies reveal that resettled A-level students generally have someone to help them (RMC Research Corporation 1984).
4. Insights and information gained through two years of experience with the current list of competencies.

Deleting Competencies

The next task participants dealt with was to decide which competencies would be deleted. A competency was deleted for one of three reasons: 1) It was redundant; 2) it was not critical for survival; or 3) it was better taught in the U.S.

Redundancies

In the 1983 curriculum, many competencies appeared in more than one topical area. Two competencies from the 1983 list illustrate this point:

H-6 (Housing)	Report household emergencies by phone; give and spell name/address and give telephone number when asked.
TE-5 (Telephone)	Report an emergency (fire, theft or medical emergency) to police from a home phone; give and spell name/address and give telephone number when asked.

Redundancies had been deliberately built into the 1983 list. To streamline the regional curriculum, it was decided to eliminate most redundancies. However, review of important competencies is built into each site version of the curriculum.

The regional review revealed not only cross-topical redundancy, but cross-component redundancy as well: many ESL competencies were being covered in the Work Orientation and CO components. However, in some cases, such as with some of the employment-related competencies, it was decided that redundancy between components was desirable, since it provides needed reinforcement from another point of view and from a different teacher.

Not Critical for Survival

Participants concluded that many of the higher-level competencies were not critical for survival, e.g., filling out a customs declaration form or a change of address form. Moreover, students at these levels had demonstrated sufficient proficiency to handle unfamiliar situations by paraphrasing, requesting clarification, and asking for assistance. Thus, it was not necessary to try to include in the curriculum every unfamiliar situation students are likely to encounter in the U.S.

Better Taught Stateside

Given the time available and the predominantly foreign language environment in the camp programs, participants suggested that competencies be limited to those that students can master most effectively in the context of the camps. For example, many competencies related to using the telephone in non-emergency situations or to opening a bank account were deleted, since it was felt that they would be more effectively covered in the U.S. and that they were not critical for the first few months of resettlement.

Another consideration was whether competencies involved situations that vary geographically in the U.S. Competencies that were not generalizable across resettlement situations should not be included, it was decided. Asking for a bus transfer, for example, was deleted for this reason. Exceptions were made for competencies considered critical. Making emergency telephone calls is an example of such an exception.

The Cumulative Nature of Competencies

Basic to the new interpretation of the ESL competencies is the concept that competencies are cumulative from level to level – that is, students at B-, C-, D-, or E-level should be able to perform all competencies below their level. Although this concept was incorporated into the 1983 curriculum, it was not a dynamic part of the curriculum.

There are several corollaries to the principle of cumulative competencies:

In most cases, when competencies from lower levels are covered at higher levels, the level of linguistic difficulty remains that of the lower level.

2. Studies and surveys consulted:

Center for Applied Linguistics. Information Update: Nos. 2, 4, 5, 6. Surveys of resettlement workers and refugees. Center for Applied Linguistics. Washington, D.C. 1985.

Literacy '85. "ESL Employment Survey: Job Related Problems Identified by Employers of Indochinese." Literacy '85. Saint Paul, MN. 1983.

RMC Research Corporation. The Effects of Pre-Entry Training on the Resettlement of Indochinese Refugees. Final Report. RMC Research Corporation. Hampton, N.H. October 1984.

Thus, when a B-level competency is covered at levels C-E, the language can be at the same level of difficulty as for Level B. However, if the class can handle a more difficult, expanded version of the competency, a teacher is free to include it.

In some cases, linguistic demands are intended to be greater for higher levels. For example, compare these two competencies in directions:

Level A: "Follow simple oral directions to a place." [Turn right/left. Go straight for ___ blocks.]

Level C: "Follow detailed oral directions to a place in a building." [Upstairs, Third Floor, Room 14A]

It was assumed that teachers would consider including competencies from the next higher level, time permitting and depending on student ability. For example, listing a competency at a C-level would not preclude it being covered at B-level, when appropriate.

Meeting Outcomes

Montemar meeting participants proposed that more than one-third of the 1983 ESL competencies be either deleted or recombined with other competency statements. Seventeen competencies were added from the MELT curriculum. The table in the next column shows some of the results of the Montemar competency review process by level.

Stateside Review

The final step in the competency review was the response by U.S. educators to the proposed changes. Six of the former MELT projects provided comments. Once all responses from the MELT projects were compiled, they were sent to the sites in Southeast Asia. The individual sites then incorporated relevant stateside comments into their site curricula.

Results of the Competency Review by Level

	Number of 1983 ESL Competencies	Deleted/ Recombined/ Added	Remaining Competencies
Level A	83	- 28	55
Level B	57	+ 2	59
Level C	49	- 5	44
Level D	52	- 26	26
Level E	61	- 43	18
TOTAL	302	-100	202

Conclusion

Meeting participants felt that the curriculum revision reflected the concerns of the teachers and supervisors who implement the ESL curriculum and addressed the changing language needs of refugee students in the U.S. The group agreed that only through periodic assessment of the curriculum, both by Southeast Asian practitioners and U.S. refugee program representatives, can we be sure that what we are teaching continues to serve the concerns of the staff and the needs of the students.

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COMPARISON OF 1983 AND REVISED COMPETENCIES*

TOPIC: HEALTH

1983	Revised
LEVEL A	
State medical problems in simple terms, including common ailments and injuries. ("My arm hurts.")	Describe own physical condition in simple terms. ("I'm tired. My foot hurts.")
Describe own general condition in simple terms. ("I'm tired.")	
Indicate where pain is located. ("Here.")	
Locate a limited number of medical facilities, including reading signs for HOSPITAL, EMERGENCY. (PHARMACY, DRUGSTORE)	Read signs for HOSPITAL and EMERGENCY.
Follow simple instructions during a medical exam. ("Open your mouth." " Take off your shirt.")	Follow simple instructions during a medical exam. ("Open your mouth." "Take off your shirt.")
Buy medicine (prescription and familiar non-prescription).	
State own need for medical help. ("Help. I'm sick.")	
LEVEL B	
Describe others' medical problems in simple terms. ("His arm hurts.")	Describe others' physical condition in simple terms. ("His arm hurts.")
Make a doctor's appointment in person, giving own name, address, telephone number and name of doctor when asked.	Make a medical appointment in person (give name, address, telephone number when asked).
Check in for an appointment.	Check in for an appointment. Identify oneself, one's appointment time, and doctor's name.
Ask doctor/nurse about own physical condition for treatment plan, using simple language. ("What's the problem?")	
Follow simple oral instructions about treatment. ("Stay in bed. Drink water.")	Follow simple oral instructions about treatment. ("Stay in bed. Take one pill every day.")
Ask about and follow simple instructions for using medicine. ("How much?" "How many?")	Ask about and follow simple instructions for using medicine. ("How much? How many times?")
Determine and report body temperature as indicated by a thermometer. ("My temperature is 100.")	
	Buy prescription and familiar non-prescription medicine. ("I need some aspirin.")

**The complete list of the revised ESL Competencies is available from the Center for Applied Linguistics.*

COMPARISON OF 1983 AND REVISED COMPETENCIES (CONT.)

1983	Revised
LEVEL C	
Describe symptoms associated with common illnesses.	Describe symptoms associated with common illnesses.
Read time, date and name of doctor/nurse for a medical appointment (On Friday, March 13, 4:30) in person or from an appointment card.	Read an appointment card, including time, date and name of doctor/nurse (Friday, March 13, 4:30, Dr. Walsh).
Ask about the availability of an interpreter. ("I need an interpreter. I speak Vietnamese.")	
Locate (a limited number of) facilities within a hospital by reading signs, e.g., X-RAY, LAB, PHARMACY.	Read signs for X-RAY, LAB, PHARMACY, and DRUGSTORE.
Read labels on prescription medicine, including common instructions and abbreviations. ("Take 2 tsp. 3 times a day.")	Read and follow directions on medicine labels, including common instructions and abbreviations. ("Take 2 tsp. 3 times a day.")
Change or cancel a doctor's appointment in person. Ask simple questions about a treatment plan. ("Can I go to work?")	Read the names of common non-prescription medicines (aspirin, cough medicine).
Report the nature of a medical emergency on the phone.	Ask doctor/nurse about own physical condition for treatment plan, using simple language. ("What's the problem?")
LEVEL D	
Make a doctor's appointment on the telephone, giving name, address, telephone number and nature of problem.	Make, change or cancel a medical appointment (give name, address, telephone number, nature of problem).
Change or cancel a doctor's appointment on the telephone, giving a simple reason for the change.	
Call to report lateness for an appointment.	
State results of visit to doctor/clinic/hospital to friends or co-workers.	
Read labels on prescription medicine, including common warnings.	Read warnings, storage directions, expiration dates and emergency instructions on medicines. (REFRIGERATE AFTER OPENING; KEEP OUT OF THE REACH OF CHILDREN)
Read the generic names of common non-prescription medicines (aspirin, cough syrup).	
Ask for assistance in a drugstore setting to locate common non-prescription medicines (aspirin, cough syrup).	
Describe own emotional state and explain the reason for it. ("I am sad because I think about my family in Cambodia.")	Describe own emotional state and explain the reason for it. ("I am depressed because I think about my family in Cambodia all the time.")
Fill out a simple insurance form with assistance.	
Respond to simple questions about physical condition or disability. ("Do you have any health problems?" "I have allergies.")	

COMPARISON OF 1983 AND REVISED COMPETENCIES (CONT.)

1983	Revised
LEVEL E	
Fill out a standard medical history form with the use of bilingual reference materials.	
Explain own and others' medical problems in detail. ("My back hurts when I lift heavy objects.")	
Describe general medical history orally, including names of major illnesses.	
Name appropriate specialist to visit for common medical problems.	
Respond to questions about means of payment (e.g., insurance, Medicaid).	Respond to questions about means of payment (e.g., insurance, Medicaid).
Get information about a patient in a hospital, including room number and condition.	
Telephone or write a simple note to school/work explaining own or child's absence due to illness.	
Offer advice for health problems. ("You've been sick for a long time. Why don't you see a doctor?")	